

The Education of Indigenous Citizens in Latin America

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The Education of Indigenous Citizens in Latin America

Edited by
Regina Cortina

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Introduction

Regina Cortina

This book explores the development of intercultural bilingual education throughout Latin America. As a set of educational practices, intercultural bilingual education, which recognizes and preserves the cultural and linguistic diversity of peoples in the Americas, aims to replace longstanding colonialism and the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples. The implementation of these practices has not been without difficulty and setbacks, since they challenge prevailing assumptions about public education and citizenship in nations across the region. After independence, Latin American nations used the Spanish language as the basis of citizenship and nationhood and as a way to incorporate Indigenous peoples into a homogeneous and dominant culture. Against this background, the progress and the potential of a new educational paradigm are the chief concerns of this book.

A central theme of the chapters, each written by a scholar with firsthand knowledge of the region, is the rising political voice of Indigenous movements. Indigenous peoples are demanding the right to quality education for their children and greater opportunities for themselves, equal to those of non-Indigenous citizens, to have a professional career and to participate in the new political and economic reality of Latin American countries. Supporting their efforts, and highlighted in this book, are the strategic alliances between regional Indigenous movements and the European countries that have provided carefully targeted resources to help Latin American countries expand access to quality education for Indigenous children and adolescents. The book also examines larger issues that have an impact on the education of Indigenous peoples, particularly the ways in which the transformative and democratic effects of education interact with forces of inertia and inequality that still pervade the education systems of Latin American countries.

Since the last decade of the 20th century, there has been a growing democratization of social and political institutions in most countries in Latin America. That shift has led to the increased mobilization of Indigenous communities, asserting their rights to self-determination within their own territory and their cultural identity as an element of their citizenship. Concurrent with changes in national politics and policies across the region, there have been unprecedented changes in international law, leading to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007.

Within this new global context, and as a result of a wider endorsement of the rights of Indigenous peoples, most national constitutions in Latin American countries have been changed to reflect the fact that the countries are multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual. As a consequence, Indigenous communities have increased pressure for recognition of their own heritage – their unique knowledge, culture and languages – and for greater participation in political decision making in their countries.

It is within this global transformation that *The Education of Indigenous Citizens in Latin America* focuses on the inclusion of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity and the development of intercultural bilingual education (known as EIB, using the acronym in Spanish for *Educación Intercultural Bilingüe*) in schools all over the region. Only in the last decade of the 20th century Indigenous students were able to enter higher education institutions not as assimilated students who spoke only Spanish, but as representatives of their own culture with their identity and language empowering them to advance in society.

This introductory chapter traces the trajectories of education policies and practices over the last century to provide a context for understanding the development, implementation and transformation of intercultural bilingual education. It then provides an overview of the research, discussions and analysis presented in each of the chapters included in *The Education of Indigenous Citizens in Latin America*.

Intercultural Bilingual Education

This book addresses the nexus between globalization, national policies and the education of Indigenous citizens. From a global perspective, the expansion of intercultural bilingual education has had a notable impact as national social movements have worked together with international aid agencies to strengthen access to education for members of Indigenous communities in Latin America. Using countries as case studies, the authors of the chapters examine the national political discourse; the growing public dialogue on Indigenous rights, decolonization and autonomy; Indigenous social movements as political actors; and changes made by the State to ensure access to quality education for the most marginalized groups in present-day Latin America. A cross-cutting theme of the chapters is the recognition that education as a political issue grew from the initiatives of Indigenous movements in the region – that is, a bottom-up approach to cultural and educational policies, except in the case of Mexico where intercultural bilingual education has expanded through a top-down model supported by the State.

The studies presented in the chapters contribute to the definition and conceptual exploration of *interculturalidad*, or interculturality, which refers to heightened communication between cultures. Interculturality is not the mere presence of diversity or pluralism, and it is not to be confused with multiculturalism. Rather, it is the teaching and understanding of two different cultures on an equal footing through the schooling process, and as such it is the foundation for intercultural bilingual education. Beyond the immediate educational goal of improving the schooling for Indigenous children, the ultimate goal of EIB is to create a more democratic political order that allows for the voice of Indigenous peoples in the social, political, cultural and economic process, as well as the full recognition of their citizenship, and the elimination of the ethnic and racial exclusion they have traditionally suffered.

The Nature of EIB

As a pedagogical model, EIB has evolved as an alternative to transitional bilingual programs, which have been used all over the region since the beginning of the 20th century for teaching Spanish to Indigenous communities. One central aspect of the past programs was the forced assimilation of Indigenous communities. In contrast to bilingual education that is solely focused on the teaching of language, the aim of EIB is to create a level playing field for the teaching of two different cultures in order to eliminate the hierarchy that had been imposed since colonial times and that treated Spanish as superior and the language of schooling.

For democratization to take place, it is necessary to emphasize the important role of schools in building an intercultural conception of the nation and its citizens based on an acknowledgment of cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity. Intellectuals and social scientists in Latin America have contributed to an awareness of the persistence of racial hierarchies established during the colonial period in the structures, policies and education programs of countries in the region. In contrast to the neocolonial structures that maintain the racial and ethnic subordination of Indigenous communities, intercultural bilingual education emerged in the tradition of popular education in Latin America, using the relationship between the school and the local community to oppose the agenda of assimilation and racial hierarchy.

Of the various lenses used to recognize the purposes behind intercultural bilingual education, the one that most emphasizes breaking with the colonial past is decolonization. As the authors of the chapters explain, through interculturality the hope is to move beyond the presumed dominance of